

8-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Gilman, Sander L. (1989) "Jewish Writers in Contemporary Germany: The Dead Author Speaks," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 13: Iss. 2, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1233>

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Abstract

The question I wish to address in this essay is really quite simple: Given the fact that there are "Jews" who seem to play a major role in contemporary German "Kultur" (at least that narrower definition of culture, meaning the production of cultural artifacts, such as books—a field which, at least for Englemann, was one of the certain indicators of a Jewish component in prewar German culture)—what happened to these "Jews" (or at least the category of the "Jewish writer") in postwar discussions of culture? Or more simply: who lulled the remaining Jews in contemporary German culture and why? Why is it not possible to speak about "German-Jews" in the contemporary criticism about German culture? And, more to the point, what is the impact of this denial on those who (quite often ambivalently) see (or have been forced to see) themselves as "Germans" and "Jews," but not as both simultaneously.

Keywords

Jews, German, Kultur, culture, artifacts, books, book, Englemann, Jewish, prewar German culture, prewar, Germany, Jewish writer, postwar, contemporary German, German-Jews, criticism, denial, Jews, German

Jewish Writers in Contemporary Germany:
the Dead Author Speaks

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Towards a Statement of the Problem

In his widely read and often reprinted book of 1970, *Germany without Jews*, the German newspaperman and former member of the anti-fascist resistance Bernt Engelmann, documented the disappearance of the Jews from Germany.¹ Not just their physical absence, but their disappearance from their central, pre-Holocaust role in “Germany’s cultural, political, and spiritual development” (4). To do so, Engelmann, whom one would not accuse lightly of profascist sentiments, documents in fastidious detail the role that “Jews” (and his definition is left purposely vague) played in German culture (understood very broadly) from the time of Jewish emancipation in the early nineteenth century through the rise of the Nazis. Engelmann assumes that Jews play no role in contemporary German culture. While he cites a few contemporary examples, they are usually in his view marginal ones, Jews who have allied themselves in the Federal Republic with right-wing causes. For Engelmann, the Jews of the Empire as well as the Weimar Republic were most often on the side of the angels, and it is the death of this liberal utopia that he mourns. This can set the problem for this present essay: What happens in a society when your internalized label for your sense of self becomes taboo? What happens when the category into which you can fit your fictive self becomes invisible?

Other critics who have dealt with the Jew in the contemporary German states have been somewhat more subtle in their analysis. Jack Zipes, whose politics are certainly as “pure” as those of Engelmann, at least sees that Jews exist within the contemporary

intellectual life of the Federal Republic, but represents them as disaffected and distanced.² And he, perhaps more realistically than Engelmann (whose book he nevertheless calls “important”), sees that the so-called “Jewish” presence is much more politically differentiated. But even for Zipes, the presence of Jews in West German culture is marked by their absence. His prime examples of Jewish intellectuals in West Germany are Lea Fleischmann and Henryk Broder, both German-speaking Jews who chose to emigrate in the early 1980s. Peter Sichrovsky, in a volume of interviews with young Jews living in contemporary West Germany and Austria, seems to document much the same fact.³ These Jews are alienated, disaffected, relatively unproductive, and certainly not in the mainstream of (West or East) German or Austrian “Kultur” (written with a capital “K”).

The question I wish to address in this essay is really quite simple: given the fact that there are “Jews” who seem to play a major role in contemporary German “Kultur,” at least that narrower definition of culture, meaning the production of cultural artifacts, such as books—a field which, at least for Engelmann, was one of the certain indicators of a Jewish component in prewar German culture—what happened to these “Jews” (or at least the category of the “Jewish writer”) in postwar discussions of culture? Or simpler: who killed the remaining Jews in contemporary German culture and why? Why is it not possible to speak about “German-Jews” in the contemporary criticism about German culture? And, more to the point, what is the impact of this denial on those who (quite often ambivalently) see (or have been forced to see) themselves as “Germans” and “Jews,” but not as both simultaneously?

Let me begin by doing something that none of the studies I have mentioned risked undertaking and which I, up to now in this essay, have done only by inference. Let me define what I mean by a Jew, at least within the confines of my discussion of the role of German Jews in contemporary German literary culture. A Jewish writer is one labeled as a Jew who responds to this labeling in that medium, literature, which has the greatest salience for a Jew and a writer. I have documented in great detail in my recent book *Jewish Self Hatred* how one of the red threads of Christian anti-Semitism has been the view that Jews possess a polluted and polluting discourse.⁴ I have shown how the idea of the special or hidden nature of the Jews’ discourse shapes the representation of the self within the text of Jews who respond to such a contextualization of their discourse. And this

response takes the form of writing about Jews and attempting to represent their discourse within the confines of that object, the book, which both provides status for the Jew as writer in a society that values writers (such as Germany) and also contains the legend of his or her own inability to ever command the discourse of that culture.

My task in this essay must therefore be twofold. I must be able to show you how, within the confines of postwar culture, in the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and Austria, this tradition of representing the Jew as possessing a damaged and damaging discourse maintained itself, in spite of a radical reconstruction of German culture. And I must be able to present to you “Jewish” writers in German who have a broad audience and within whose fictive personalities (and the texts generated by them) the representation of the theme of a “Jewish” discourse plays a major role. If I am lucky I will also find texts in which the reworking of the alienation and isolation appropriate to the fictive personality of writers in the post-Holocaust world reflects constructively upon this problem.

For the first task, I have been helped greatly by Ruth Angress’s brilliant exposition of what she calls “A ‘Jewish Problem’ in German Postwar Fiction.”⁵ And because she generally limited the parameters of this question to the world of fiction (rather than the stage or lyric poetry), I shall follow her lead while focusing this material for my own purposes. As for the selection of authors—well, there are any number of writers who fall into my category of “Jewish” writers, from Wolf Biermann to Günter Kunert, from Stefan Heym to Rosa Ausländer. These are writers who have selected “Jewish” themes and have presented themselves as major figures in the cultural life of the state in which they dwell. Some of them returned from exile after 1945, some of them were forced to remain in Germany, either in the camps or in hiding, some were born after the war. For the purposes of this essay I will limit myself to a detailed discussion of two widely read (and filmed) writers, Edgar Hilsenrath, who survived the death camps, immigrated to the United States where he began to write, and then returned to West Germany in the 1960s, and Jurek Becker, whose expulsion from East Berlin in the wake of Wolf Biermann’s forced exile was mitigated by the granting of an extended visa, ironically because of his status as one “persecuted by the fascist regime.” Becker and Hilsenrath are both productive members of the cultural elite, living today in West Berlin.

The Representation of the Jew's Discourse in Postwar German Fiction

While Ruth Angress illustrates the continuity of stereotypes of the Jew in postwar German fiction (and to a lesser extent in drama), she bases her analyses on clear and close readings of major texts such as Alfred Andersch's subtly slanted portrait of the Jew in *Zanzibar or The Final Reason* (1957). Her essay concludes with the public scandal occasioned by the Frankfurt performance of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's dramatization of Gerhard Zwerenz's novel *The Earth is Uninhabitable like the Moon* (1973) under the title *City, Sewage, Death* (1975), in which a *Stürmer* caricature of the Jew as exploiter stands at the center of the work. The fullness of her examples documents the continuity of the image of the Jew after the Holocaust, even in works, such as Andersch's *Zanzibar*, that have an overtly anti-fascist message. Given this context, I will examine the central work of the writer who, at least in the Federal Republic since the 1960s, has stood as the exemplarily "liberal" political figure: Günter Grass. Even more than Heinrich Böll, Germany's sole postwar Nobel Prize winner in literature, Grass has assumed a major role in defining the idea of the author for the post-Holocaust generation, and more than any other writer of the period, his early work, the so-called Danzig Trilogy, attempted to introduce the image of the Jew into the discourse of literary modernism. Grass's Jews became exemplary Jews, not only for his German-Christian readership, but also for his German-Jewish readers, as I shall show.

The figure of Sigismund Markus, the toy dealer in *The Tin Drum* (1958) is, as Ruth Angress observes, "a stereotype with mitigating variations" (222). Let me quote her quite accurate depiction of him:

Markus, like the typical Jew of the Nazi press, is unattractive as a man, though he lusts after an Aryan woman, and ludicrous as an individual, for he acts and looks like a dog. He is a harmless parasite, a Jew without a Jewish community or a family, without a background, or religious affiliation, but with business acumen of sorts, that is, he has the ability "to get it for you wholesale," "it" being cheap stockings for Agnes (the mother of the central figure, Oskar Matzarath). He has no convictions, has just converted, a pathetic gesture from which he vainly expects to benefit,

and seems to have no emotions about the German victory, which he predicts, except that it might help him elope with Agnes to England. (222–23)

However, this is not all. For when we turn to examine the representation of Markus's discourse, how Grass has him speak as opposed to the other characters in the book, at least up to the point of Grass's "*Edelkitsch*" (to use Ruth Angress's word) reflection on Markus's death at the end of the first book of the novel, we discover a further characterization of the Jew.

I have discussed in my study of Jewish self-hatred, the use of *mauscheln* or *jüdeln* (speaking with a Jewish accent) as the means by which writers by the end of the nineteenth century characterized the corrupt nature of Jewish discourse. Not Yiddish, which at least by the close of World War I had come to be recognized in Germany (as well as officially among Yiddish-speaking Jews), as a separate and distinct literary language. For by that point literary works were being translated from the Yiddish for the mass German market. Rather it was *mauscheln*, speaking German with a Yiddish accent, which came to characterize the Jew as parvenue.

When we turn to Markus's language, it is therefore of little surprise, given Angress's thesis, that he speaks in *mauscheln*. Let me quote, in the original, the conclusion of Markus's address to Oscar Matzerath's mother, Agnes, to which Angress makes reference in the passage cited above:

All right if you want to bet on Matzerath, what you got him already. Or do me a favor, bet on Markus seeing he's just fresh baptized. We'll go to London, I got friends there and plenty stocks and bonds if you just decide to come, or all right if you won't come with Markus because you despise me, so despise me. But I beg you down on my knees, don't bet no more on Bronski that's meshugge enough to stick by the Polish Post Office when the Poles are pretty soon all washed up when the Germans come.⁶

The quality of Markus's voice can be adduced from the adjectives "supplicating" and "exaggerated" which are used by Agnes to qualify her perception of Markus's message. This, in itself, would prove only that within his fictional recreation of the world of Danzig,

Grass selected a specific figure who, with his suicide after his shop is vandalized, represents a sentimentalized type, a so-called "positive" stereotype. But there is much more to this than that. For the opening book of the novel, in which the story of Sigismund Markus's life and death is interwoven, is a world of myriad types, from the peasant grandmother of the central figure, Oskar Matzarath, to the Poles and Danzig-Germans who inhabit his world. No one, however, no matter what their ethnic or linguistic background, speaks in dialect, in a fictionally represented gender-based or class-based idiolect, except Markus, and he does it every time he appears.

Markus is different. His accent marks him as different, but his accent also reveals the nature of his personality. He is both subordinate and aggressive; sexually charged and self-deprecating; a Jew and yet a not a Jew. It is the latter, the act of conversion, that reveals the absence of the center signified by the use of *mauscheln*. The speakers of Yiddish (or, indeed, the speaker of German or Hebrew) all have centers to their personalities. They have worlds of culture to which they can relate—books exist in their languages, which mark the boundaries of culture. But speakers who *mauscheln* are between cultures, and individuals represented as moving across boundaries are always understood as polluting and polluted.

One can at least suggest that Grass would have been quite conscious of the implications of his use of *mauscheln*. In the generalized image of the Jew promulgated by the Nazis from the 1920s onward, the image of the *mauschelnd* Jew dominated—for example, in the caricatures in *Der Stürmer*, the most rabid anti-Semitic newspaper of the period. All Jews were portrayed as *mauschelnd* since the intention of the image was to create the implication that no matter how well Jews spoke German, hidden within them was a *mauschelnd* Jew. In contrast one can examine a text by Grass's acknowledged literary model, the German-Jewish writer Alfred Döblin, where clearly contrasting images of the discourse of the Jews in Poland can be found.⁷ In 1926 Döblin published his *Travels to Poland*, which includes a detailed account of a trip to visit the Jewish section of Warsaw in 1924–25. In this complex text, Döblin critiques the superstitions present in the Chassidic community as well as its primitive surroundings. Central to Döblin's image of the Easter Jew is the image of himself as different, as possessing a secret, hidden language, the language of the Jew, while attempting to be a German liberal writer, that is, a writer without the ideological limitations imposed by any model of

race. His image of his mother marks the image of the Jew for Döblin. He remembers her sitting, on religious holidays, “holding one of her books in her hands, and reading in it for a while, in Hebrew and with a half-articulated voice. Sometimes it was only a mumbling. When I think about being Jewish, this image stands before me” (157–58). Yiddish is for Döblin a language not spoken but rather sung, and sung like the sounds of a bird (“sie gurren und singen jiddisch” [12]). In his description of Yom Kippur, this image of the Jew as possessing only an animalistic mode of discourse repeats itself. The Jews are depicted as “murmelnd” and “summend” (92–93), noises associated with animals but also, as will be noted, with Döblin’s image of his mother. This overlapping of song and the language of the Jews reflects, as we shall see in Grass’s work, a specific intertextuality. The language of the Jews is literary German, even when the content of their discourse is criticized. Grass consciously chose the language of one central text used by the anti-Semites of the Weimar period to represent the hidden discourse of the Jews, the sign of the Jews’ difference.

In the final volume of the Danzig Trilogy (following the *Novelle Cat and Mouse* [1961], which represents a world in which Jews simply do not exist), the massive novel *Dog Years* (1963), Grass thematizes the question of the Jews’s discourse and specifies its origin, at least for the German-speaking Jews of the late nineteenth century, in one of its central texts. The plot of *Dog Years* hinges on the complex relationship between a Jew who is not a Jew, Eduard Amsel, and his friend Walter Matern, a German who is not a German. Indeed, this is the complex which Grass wishes to examine in the novel, how the antagonism between two friends mirrors the general dehumanization of both Jews and Germans under the impact of Nazi ideology. Grass locates the conflict within “Eddi” Amsel as resulting from the absence of his Jewish father, killed during World War I, a Jew who responded, within the classic model of self-hatred, to the image of the Jew that dominated his society. And for Reserve Lieutenant Albrecht Amsel the book that he reads and that shapes his image of the Jew is Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* (1903). Weininger’s work was the classic work of self-hatred of the turn of the century, a work which became notorious to no little degree because of its author’s suicide shortly before its publication. Grass knows the importance of this text and charts how both father and son, at two very different periods of time, before World War I and just prior to the Nazi takeover of Danzig, turn to this work for their definition of Jew. The

responses of the father are in two very specific arenas: he finds an athletic club and sings in the church choir “because it was said in the standard work (i.e., Weininger) that the Jew does not sing and does not engage in sports” (170). Likewise “Eddi” Amsel “let his boy soprano . . . jubilate in Mozart Masses and short arias, and in regard to sports threw himself body and soul into the game of faustball” (170). The image of the Jew’s polluted and polluting discourse is present subliminally within the novel, for the passage from Weininger to which Grass refers reads:

Just as the acuteness of Jews has nothing to do with true power of differentiating, so his shyness about singing or even about speaking in clear positive tones has nothing to do with real reserve. It is a kind of inverted pride: having no true sense of his own worth, he fears being made ridiculous by his singing or his speech.⁸

Thus Grass points—to those knowledgeable in the tradition of literary anti-Semitism, the anti-Semitism secreted within the book, that icon of German culture—to the myth of the faulty, hidden discourse of the Jews, the desire of the Jews to keep their speech masked. He reflects here, in another intertextual link, upon his teacher Alfred Döblin’s own ambiguity concerning his Jewish identity, the qualities of his discourse, and the image of the discourse of the Eastern Jew, here not the Jew of Warsaw, but of Danzig. He thematizes this, reversing as he often does the standard images of the anti-Semite in his depiction of Jew and non-Jew.⁹

Grass’s ironic shifting of stereotypes breaks down at one crucial moment. Grass provides a secret language, a sort of schoolyard pig Latin, which binds Amsel and Matern, a simple reversal of words which functions as the hidden language of the boys, neither Jew nor non-Jew. Knowing the tradition of the Jews’ hidden language, having seen it at work in Weininger and Döblin, Grass nevertheless places the creation of this secret language squarely on the shoulders of the “Jew” Eddi Amsel:

At most little Probst and Heine Kadlubek, the son of a coal dealer, were privileged to listen while Walter Matern maintained a long dark staring silence and Eduard Amsel developed

his secret language, giving new names to the new surroundings.
 "I tnod ekil eht sdrib ereh."
 "I don't like the birds here." (89)

This linguistic link established between the two boys is the invention of the Jew who believes in it, who believes that it signifies a real bond between Matern, the silent one, and Amsel, the creator of their secret language. It is, of course, in the moment of Amsel's betrayal, when Matern, joined by a group of Hitler Youth, beats Amsel senseless, that the secret language, the link between friends, is revealed to be merely the Jew's illusion of friendship:

As this fist strikes him, it grinds its teeth behind a black rag. From Amsel's red-foaming mouth, a question blows bubbles: "Is it you? Si ti uoy?" But the grinding fist doesn't speak, it only punches." (213)

Grass attempts to redeem the *mauschelnd* figure of Markus by revealing how both Jew and non-Jew, in a specific historical moment, became convinced of the Jew's difference, and more specifically, the difference in their discourse. This could be a conscious reflection of what Grass, the non-Jew, had done in *The Tin Drum*. But it fails as a thematization of this problem since it is still the Jew, the slightly dull and heavy-lidded "Eddi" Amsel who creates this hidden language. It is a feature of the absence of the center of the Jew, since it distorts the true language of fiction, German, and Grass recognized this by providing a "translation" of each of these lines into correct, non-reversed German. (This is quite unlike Markus's language in *The Tin Drum*, which while distorted was assumed by Grass to be comprehensible.) Amsel's language is a Jewish invention, and it remains as the Jew's even at the moment of the awareness of Amsel's sense of his own difference. For up to that moment Amsel is a Jew only in a reactive mode, only in the sense that he, like his father before him, must prove that not a Jew; at the moment of his betrayal by Matern, his discourse becomes that of the Jew, the marker of difference between his former friend and himself, a discourse which marks the difference between Jew and non-Jew. This is a powerful moment, but some of its power rests on the unstated parallel to Weininger's as well as Döblin's image of the discourse of the Jew. And this intertextual relationship,

indicated over and over again within the novel through Grass's use of Weininger as the arch-anti-Semite, points toward the spoiled discourse of the Jew. For Grass, perhaps, it is the discourse spoiled at a specific historical moment, when the Jew's parochial identity is abandoned, their sense of difference is suspended, and they desire to become merely German.

This tension within the most important set of works of the early 1960s to deal with the "Jewish Problem" shaped the idea of the Jew in the area of liberal, high culture in Germany. For Grass's work became one of the touchstones for the Germans' understanding of the Jew within the clearly identified political area of liberal ideology. Grass became one of the self-appointed guardians of Germans' liberal tradition. In the 1960s elections Grass went on the hustings, speaking throughout the Federal Republic in support of the Social Democrats. During the election campaign of 1965 Grass wrote his "Transatlantic Elegy" to commemorate the pure but lost German which he was able to find only among the Jewish émigrés when he journeyed across the Atlantic.¹⁰ Grass romanticizes the "Swabian, Saxon, Hessian" of these Jews as that language which remained uncorrupted by the Nazis. And yet, in the words he places in their mouths, they fear returning to Germany because "my German—it's old fashioned I know—/won't everyone guess, that I was so long. . . ." The Jews with their "emigrant and beautifully preserved language" fear to be marked by their speech, by the rhetoric of difference. Indeed it is in the account of the next election campaign of 1969, Grass's *The Dairy of a Snail* (1972), that he embeds a further portrait of the Jew, here as survivor, in his recounting of his travels.¹¹ The connection between Grass's political visibility and his image of the Jew is not lost, even on Grass himself.

Grass's importance in the German Democratic Republic should also not be underestimated. Even though *The Tin Drum* was not published officially in the German Democratic Republic until 1987, and then clearly labeled as an historical artifact, it had an extraordinary impact on experimental writers of the 1960s and seventies through the circulation of illegal copies of this and other works by Grass. For writers, especially Jewish writers, Grass's image of the Jew was a powerful, liberally sanctioned image of the Jew.

Listening to a Jew Listening to Jews

Edgar Hilsenrath and Jurek Becker are two writers whose work exemplifies the “liberal” reaction of writers labeled as Jews to the tradition of the special or hidden quality of the Jews’ discourse. The younger of the two, Becker, born in 1937, is the author of what is perhaps the most important representation of the Jew in the literature of the German Democratic Republic. Prior to Becker, as Ruth Angress observed, the standard image was that of Bruno Apitz’s *Naked Among Wolves* (1958), in which the Jew was represented by an infant child rescued from the death camp by the Communist underground. Becker presents, if not the first speaking Jew as victim (Franz Fühmann does that in his novella *The Jew’s Auto* [1962]), the first novel by a Jewish writer in which the Jewish victim of the German comes into full voice.

The world of Jurek Becker’s first novel, *Jacob the Liar* (1969), is fully the world of the victim.¹² Becker, who spent his childhood in the Lodz ghetto and then in the camps at Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen, learned German in East Berlin after the war. His first novel centers about the image of the Jew as victim coping with the world of the Holocaust. The eponymous hero, Jacob the Liar, invents the existence of a radio in the ghetto of the small town in which he lives. The radio becomes the source of hope for all those who are without hope. Jacob, who adopts a small child whose parents are deported, is torn between the lies that give comfort and the realization of the eventual destruction of himself, the child, and their world. In an extraordinary moment in the novel, he takes the child into the basement, where she believes the imaginary radio to be hidden, and recreates, from behind a screen, a “fairy-tale” hour for her. The world of wholeness, of the normal, is recreated in the lies of Jacob, but they are lies that he consciously knows ameliorate the world in which he and the child find themselves.

Becker has taken one of the strongest myths about the polluted and polluting discourse of the Jew, the image of the lying Jew, and reversed it. Weininger’s image of the Jew as the natural liar is countered. Jacob lies as a means for survival, not out of any inborn desire to lie but because of the force of circumstance. In retelling the story of Jacob, Becker is forced to create a new discourse for the Jew,

at least for the speaking Jew in the novel. He employs a narrator to retell the tale of Jacob's lies, but it is a narrator who is himself creating a tale, not the story of the heroism of the martyrdom in the camps (a literary perspective common to novels on this theme written in the German Democratic Republic), but the tale of the creation of a moment of near sanity through lies in a world gone mad.

The success of Becker's undertaking can be measured in the very fact that the speaking Jews in Becker's novel are given a discourse that, for postwar German critics, seems to be an accurate reconstruction of the discourse of the Jew. Becker's use of German literary devices, such as the intonation of the narrative voice, as well as the "local color" (through the conscious absence of any Yiddishisms) of the Lodz ghetto, creates, for the German reader, the impression of the speaking Jew. Becker's success in the undertaking permits the living Jew, the narrative voice, to recount the events of the "lying" Jew and thus give proof of his ability to command both a "Jewish" discourse and a "German" one.

The act of writing attempts to distance the charge of the silence of the Jews while putting to rest yet another calumny, the image of the lying Jew. Becker's attempt to mirror the world of the victim, of the dead, in *Jacob the Liar* succeeds because we are confronted with the living voice of the narrator at the conclusion of the novel. The pendant to *Jacob the Liar*, Becker's *The Boxer* (1976), is a much more complicated novel; it presents the world of the child not as victim but as survivor.¹³ Like *Jacob the Liar*, *The Boxer* depends on the voice of the narrator to place the reader in a specific relationship to the world of the survivor, the created images of the "good" Jew and the "bad" Jew, of the acceptable solution and the unacceptable one to the problem of bearing witness.

The plot of *The Boxer* is fairly straightforward. Aron Blank, who calls himself Arno to avoid being again identified as a Jew, has survived the camps and is searching for his son, Mark, who, before the Germans invaded, had been living with his divorced wife. He finds a child called Mark in a hospital for displaced children and identifies him as his missing child, even though the last name is not correct. He raises the child in the turmoil of postwar Germany, living, as did Becker and his father, in the Soviet zone of Berlin. The tale shows the shaping of both father and son by the postwar experience. Emblematic of this experience is the title vignette. The boy is beaten up by a group of toughs, and his father decides to teach him how to

box. The new Jew, Arno, needs to have the tools to deal with the new world, tools that Aron lacked. The relationship between father and son, however, deteriorates as the boy grows up. Eventually Mark leaves home, wanders the world, and dies fighting as a Jew in one of the Arab-Israeli conflicts. The novel closes with the narrator, who had reconstructed Arno/Aron's and Mark's story from his interviews with Aron, becoming aware that Arno's fate was determined through his survival and that surviving can be as much of a hell as were the camps.

Becker's presentation of the survivor as victim and as the "new" Jew is yet another restructuring of the image of the writer. The pseudo-Yiddish tone of *Jacob the Liar* (which has been compared with Shalom Aleichem's romanticized reconstructions of shtetl life) presented one language for the speaking Jew. It was not *mauscheln* but the intonation of the Yiddish speaker, an intonation that has its roots as much in the literary tradition of Jewish narrative presented by the premier Christian novelist of the German Democratic Republic, Johannes Bobrowski, and his *Levin's Mill* (1964) as it does in Yiddish.¹⁴ The investigatory tone of *The Boxer* is quite different. The tone is taken from the world of socialist realism, of the narrator as investigative reporter.

But the theme reported is quite the same: the special language of the Jews, the death of the Jews' language in the world of the camps. When Arno/Aron first meets Mark he asks: " 'Did anyone tell you who I am?' The child says: 'No.' 'I am your father. . . . Then you are my son,' Aron says. 'Do you understand?' 'No.' For a few minutes Aron could not understand what Mark could not comprehend. The directress of the hospital had not said a word that he was *meshugge*. He said: 'What don't you understand?' 'That word.' 'What word?' 'The one you said.' 'Son?' 'Yes' " (64-65).

The word "son" does not exist in Mark's world, since for as long as he can remember he has not been a "son," only a child. What is most striking about this moment in the narrative is that the author's use of indirect discourse embedded in the direct dialogue between father and putative son, a discourse that is to reveal to us the inner working of Arno's mind, is characterized by the use of a Yiddishism, one that is clearly part of German slang but in spite of this is also self-evidently Yiddish. Arno is the Jew as survivor; his son, the child who must develop a new persona. The father's world is determined by his camp experience; the son's is also, but he at least has the potential for some independent growth and change.

After Mark leaves, he writes his father a long letter explaining his action. The core of the letter is his charge that his father's silence has made any relationship between them impossible: "You can say that I never spoke to you about this as long as there was a chance. Then I must charge you with having raised me to silence. I know that you are a rather intelligent person, I am evidently one also. Why then did we never speak about these important matters? It wasn't my fault that I can only guess what is going on in your head. I never heard from you" (285). The silence is the silence between generations, but it is also the silence of the Jew as survivor. Aron is unable to respond. He never answers any of his son's many letters.

For seven years Aron receives his son's letters, one a month until June 1967, when the letters cease. What puzzles Aron is how his son had become a Jew, a Jew who would live on a kibbutz and die fighting for Israel. Who could have "made a Jew out of him?" he wonders. Does not one have the right to choose? "A child of Catholic parents can choose when it comes of age freely to remain or not remain a Catholic. Why then, he asked me, are the children of Jewish parents denied the same right?" (298). But being a Jew denies the possibility of free will. The narrator presents Aron's questions as impossible, and he avoids the most evident of answers. Mark "becomes" a Jew, a "new" Jew, because his father remains an "old" Jew, a silent Jew, a Jew condemned to the world that followed the camps. Mark's attempts to "speak" to his father through his letters and Aron's inability to respond are the metaphor for the difference.

Becker claims to incorporate many of his own wartime experiences into his fiction. In an interview given in the late 1970s, Becker speaks about his father's search for him following the war, when he was seven.¹⁵ He reports that his earliest memories stem from this period. After he was found by his father, they went to live in the Soviet zone of Berlin for "reasons which I can only guess. For he would never speak to me of them" (11). Unlike the protagonists of his novel, Becker remained in East Berlin with his father until his father's death in 1972. His sense of identity was as a Jew in the new Communist state. He observes that "he does not know what the signs are which mark one as being Jewish. I know that others claim to identify such signs. I hear that a Jew is one whose mother is Jewish. . . . A human being is one who has human beings for parents, no more, no less" (13). While Becker rejects the particularism of any religious identification as a Jew, he sees himself within a larger literary tradition.

At the conclusion of this interview he observes that after *Jacob the Liar* appeared, reviewers placed him in the tradition of Shalom Aleichem and I. B. Singer. He had, however, been exposed to Shalom Aleichem only through the highly sanitized stage version of his work *Fiddler on the Roof* and had never read any Singer at all. "Now I can imagine, that someone will say after this bit of information: 'See, there we have it! It's the Jewishness in you which the critics recognize. And whether you admit it or not, it's there.'" Becker concludes by observing that perhaps there is a modicum of truth in this: "I don't feel myself as a Jew, but am one in a hundred ways. And so? Why should I try to solve this riddle? Would I be any the wiser? I am afraid not. I am afraid that I would uselessly try to solve the secret, a secret without which my life would be poorer" (18). The secret that Becker senses behind his "Jewish" identity, his identity as a Jewish writer, or at least a writer in a Jewish mode, is the secret language of the Jews, the overcoming of the curse of silence, of his father's silence, and his ability to write this silence out of existence in the fantasies of his prose. For he kills his alter ego, Mark, in defense of a Jewish world. Mark becomes the ideal of the "state of peasants and workers," the German Democratic Republic's motto, by working as a "peasant" (Aron's word) on a kibbutz, and he dies in the defense of that world, just as the heroes of all good socialist realistic novels are programmed to die in defense of the socialist fatherland. *The Boxer*, with its complex narrative mode, its mode of retelling, but a retelling through the probing voice of the questioner, is the exorcism of the silence of the father as Jew and the Jew as father.

Becker's most recent novel, *Bronstein's Children* (1986) is his first return to a "Jewish" theme since his immigration to West Berlin in 1977.¹⁶ In 1977 Becker resigned from the Writers' Union because of Wolf Biermann's exile from the GDR, but he alone of the writers who made this grand gesture was permitted to maintain his citizenship while being granted a longterm visa to "permit" him to live in the West. One simply does not exile writers who are identified in the public eye as Jews. (While Becker did collect his short stories in 1980, which included a brilliant story about the Nazi ghettos in Poland, "the Wall," this story was written before 1977).¹⁷ *Bronstein's Children* is without a doubt the most successful work Becker has written in the West. Originally intended to be titled "How I Became A German," the novel traces two years in the formation of a young Jew in the German Democratic Republic from the perspective of his growing

sense of his own conflicts of identity. The plot deals with a family, a father, his eighteen-year-old son, and grown daughter, and their lives in 1973 and 1974 in East Berlin.

The "hero" of the novel, or at least its narrator, is the son Hans, who narrates the novel a year after the death of his father Arno in 1973. He attempts to reconstruct the events which led to his father's death and to understand how he has been constructing his life following that event. It is clear from the use of the name Arno for the father that Becker is linking both novels, not in a mechanical sense, but in a sense that he is providing the next stage in the "Jewish Question," the development of a Jewish identity in those individuals (unlike all of those in *The Boxer*) who had no firsthand experience of the Holocaust, but whose parents (and here, sibling) survived.

The complex plot has at least four major strands, one of which is the central motor force in the novel. (And it is the multistranded complexity of this work that so contrasts with Becker's last novel of the "Jewish Question," *The Boxer*). Arno and two of his friends kidnap an individual whom they had recognized as a guard at the concentration camp at Neuengamme. They tie him to a bedstead in Arno's country house and proceed to "interrogate" him. Hans had been using the house for assignations with his girlfriend and stumbles across the scene. The second strand links Hans and his Jewish girlfriend Martha, who has become an actress and is starring in a film about the Holocaust. The third strand links Hans and his sister Ella, who is in an asylum, insane, having been horribly mistreated by the family with whom she was hidden (for payment) by her parents when the Nazis entered Poland. The final strand is Hans's attempt to establish himself a year after his father's death, a year which he has spent with Martha's family, the nuclear family denied him by the Holocaust, but a family deeply marked by the same events that robbed him of his family.

More than survivor guilt marks Hans. For the actions of his father and his friends seem incomprehensible to him. Why not turn the guard over to the authorities who, unlike the authorities in the Federal Republic, were sure to punish him? Is it vengeance that makes them keep him prisoner? Is it the creation of their own little camp with an inmate over which they have the same control as was held over them? Hans cannot understand these actions and attempts over and over again to interrogate his father and the prisoner. Their rationale, as explained by Arno, is that historical chance has placed them in a land

(the GDR) in which this individual will be punished only because one occupying nation rather than another dominates. The Germans (“deutsches Gesindel”) are themselves no more trustworthy in the German Democratic Republic than in the Federal Republic. Indeed, Arno later says, the Germans are the most tractable of peoples. They would act not out of belief but because they were told that to convict the guard was their duty. “Order them to eat dogshit and, if you are strong enough, they will soon take dogshit to be a delicacy” (130).

Becker’s description of Hans, the narrator, as an athlete, at the very beginning of the novel, forms an epiphany which illuminates the rest of the text, in a manner uncomprehended by the narrator until the conclusion of the work. Hans must complete the swimming test in order to get his school leaving certificate and his disinterest in doing so reflects one of the images of the Jew in German fiction, the Jew as attempting to avoid any type of physical exertion. And yet Becker plays with this standard theme much more consciously than he did in any of his earlier “Jewish” novels. The scene is set. Hans must take his swimming test and is ordered by one of his schoolmates, in schoolboy Prussian tone, to take off his swimsuit and shower. Hans’s answer is to punch him in the nose, to which the boy’s response, after he gets up, is that “he’s crazy” (430). The reader is led into the resulting uproar by the teachers who flood into the locker room, who provide a rationale for the incident. The explanation, imagined by Hans to be whispered to his victim by the teacher, is that he’s a Jew. “There are slight sensitivities, which we cannot so easily comprehend” (47). The implication is that Hans has not wanted to remove his swim suit because of his physical difference, because of his circumcised penis. But the chapter ends with the narrator’s interior monologue which reveals that his is not circumcised. He had no hidden “Jewish” motivation (in his own understanding of this) to hit his schoolmate, only an objection to his schoolmate’s pedantic, Prussian tone. Jews, according to Hans’s account of Arno’s view, are an invention of those who wish to victimize those labeled as Jews. This powerful scene reveals the reactive moment in Becker’s characters; their Jewishness is revealed only in their response to the corrupt world about them. Or so we are led by Hans to believe.

The theme of Jews as different, different because of history, because of the Holocaust, because of the Germans, not because of their own sense of difference, seems to dominate this novel, as it did *The Boxer*. For his set paper, well prepared in advance, Hans has as

his *Abitur* theme, “the cell as the means of genetic inheritences” (93).

The image of difference is ironicized. One of his father’s friends is a violinist who damns the popular view that all Jewish violinists have to be “Heifetz or Oistrach.” For people “expect greatness from him while he is sadly but an average violinist” (133). Everything having to do with concepts of difference in Hans’s world seems reversed. The Nazis are represented by the old man in the cabin stinking of shit (an ironic reversal of the *föetor judäicus*) or by the film actors in their SS uniforms, who play cards with the Jews between takes. But the Jews in the film are played by real Jews because they look like Jews. The realities of his parents, of his mother and father, photographed with real “Jews’ Stars” sewn on their clothing are opposed to the world of make-believe, in which his girlfriend, Martha, plays at being a Jewess, while really being one. This confusion of role and reality suddenly undermines the seemingly clear line between being Jewish as a role assigned by society and having any inherent sense of difference.

Becker destroys the clean line between the construction of categories of difference and the realities of difference in one extraordinary moment, a moment for which we are no more prepared than the revelation that Hans is uncircumcised. Hans has returned to the cabin again and again to speak with the captive. Once he returns home to find that his father and his friends have gathered in their apartment for a strategy session. The son pulls a set of drawers away from a hidden door, lays himself on the ground and listens to his father speak:

The first words that I heard made it clear why they did not feel it necessary to be quiet: they spoke Yiddish. It was incomprehensible to me that father could make himself understood in this language. I wanted to believe that a stranger sat there using father’s voice. Not only had he avoided speaking Yiddish in my presence, he never even indicated that he could speak the language. He spoke without clumsiness, without stuttering, as if the words flew to him from one moment to the next. I found that horrid, I felt myself betrayed. He spoke louder than all the others, so that I asked myself whether he counted on my listening and wanted thus to betray his secret to me. Never before was I so against him. . . .

The sound of this language was unpleasant, not merely strange like a normally foreign tongue. This language remained

on the border of the comprehensible, and I constantly had the feeling, that I only had to strain myself a bit in order to understand it. Perhaps they spoke Yiddish together because they believed that this language was the most appropriate for their undertaking. (221–22)

Suddenly the hidden language of the Jew, the Jew within, surfaces for Hans. Yiddish is the marker of real difference for Becker, the hidden nature of the father as Jew and victim. Hans's constant rejection of special treatment as a "victim of fascism," his uncircumcised penis, his desire to serve as the means by which the guard is rescued, all point to his sense of being a "German." He is aware of his role as a Jew, but believes this is an invention of his tormentors, as his father had always told him. Suddenly there is a difference, a sense of strangeness, of the "uncanny," that sense of the self projected into the world and made different. Hans needs to feel himself as the German he had always believed himself to be. He turns again to the country cabin, to the guard, in order to free him. There he finds his father, dead, and the guard, who screams upon seeing Hans that he "couldn't do anything; he was innocent" (300) (his cry throughout the novel, but in other circumstances). Hans begins to file off the handcuffs, when the guard says: "He has the key with him." The novel ends with Hans going to his "father and reaching into his pocket, first in the wrong one and then in the right" (302). The true key, the key to Hans's identity, to Arno's sense of self, dies with the father. The sense of change is underlined by Becker by placing the novel at the time of Walter Ulbricht's death. With the death of a generation, of a father, "missed more in death than treasured in life" (300) Hans will become a German, but will also now remain a Jew. He will not be able to abandon, to repress, his identity. This is the answer to Aron/Arno's question in *The Boxer* of "what made a Jew out of him." Becker signals this moment of awareness in his character's sense of difference through the use of the motif of the hidden language of the Jews, but now in a much more highly differentiated mode. For being a Jew is simply being one of "Bronstein's children," and the irony of an inescapable and inexorable sense of difference makes Becker's most recent novel into the most constructive means of dealing with this otherwise destructive theme. For Becker thematizes the hidden language of the

Jew in a discourse that is not “Jewish” but rather clearly German, a German of post-modernistic literary discourse exemplified by his last two “non-Jewish” novels. There is little difference in the complexity of his literary language, of his subtle use of Grassian irony; he is indeed a “German” in his cultural embeddedness, but a Jew in his representation of the contradictions of what being German means to the German-Jewish writer.

Hilsenrath and Grass *redivivus*

Edgar Hilsenrath was born in Leipzig in 1926 (and is therefore a full generation older than Becker). In 1938 he fled with his mother and brother to Rumania, where, in 1941, they were sent to the ghetto at Mogiljow-Podolski. Surviving, he emigrated with his family in 1945 to Palestine and from there in 1951 to the United States. In the late 1960s he returned to the Federal Republic and now lives, like Becker, in West Berlin. Hilsenrath is the author of a number of “Jewish” books. His first was his memoir of life in the camps, *Night*, published in German in 1978, but in English translation in 1967. The two novels I will be concentrating on, however, are Hilsenrath’s most recent: *Bronsky’s Confessions* (1980) and, his best known and best selling work, *The Nazi and the Barber* (1977), first published in English in 1971.

Hilsenrath’s reception in Germany is as a Jewish writer, a writer with specific insights into the “dilemma” of the “Jewish Question.” *Der Spiegel*, in reviewing *The Nazi and the Barber*, could simply comment that “the author knows that which he reports: Edgar Hilsenrath, 51, is a Jew.”¹⁸ This qualifier, was also applied to Becker in a number of the reviews of his first novel, *Jacob the Liar*, and places their identity as Jews and writers as parallel. In his two major novels, Hilsenrath plays with this theme, the question of a German-Jewish identity in contemporary Germany, seeing the question of the definition of the Jew as a problem, not of the Jews in Germany and the United States, but of their tormentors. Out of this critique of the idea of the Jew comes one of the most successful literary productions of recent years, Hilsenrath’s *The Nazi and the Barber*.

Bronsky’s Confessions provides a fictionalized context for the

longer and more involved novel.¹⁹ Like *Night*, it is a highly autobiographical novel, a work that completes the life story of the narrative “I” begun in the concentration camps of the earlier work. In the novel, Jakob Bronsky, a German Jew, arrives as a “displaced person” after the war, in a United States, or at least a New York, or at least a Yorkville, or at least an “immigrant cafe on Broadway and 86th” (75) seemingly populated only by German immigrants and American social outcasts. The novel begins with an ironic exchange of letters in 1938 between Bronsky’s father, Nathan, and the American counsel at Berlin attempting to get papers to enable him and his family to flee Nazi anti-Semitism. The counsel observes, in 1939, that it would not be until the 1950s before their quota as Polish Jews (for Bronsky’s father was born in what was in 1939 Poland) would enable him to grant them a visa to the United States. Nathan Bronsky’s reply, couched in the only use of English to be found in the novel is: “Fuck America!”

After the horrors of the war, in the 1950s, Jakob Bronsky and his parents arrive in America. This Nabokovian world of German Jewish émigrés centers around the title character and his obsessive desire to write his experiences in the form of a novel, to which an acquaintance gives the perfect title:

“Are you the hero of the book?”

“That could be. I’m writing it in the third person, even though the book is autobiographical.”

“Understood,” Grünspan says, “In the third person. The hero is a man?”

“Of course. The hero is a man.”

“What kind of a man?”

“A lonely man.”

“A masturbator?”

“What do you mean?”

“A lonely man is always a masturbator,” Grünspan says.

“My book doesn’t have anything to do with masturbation. It’s a serious book.”

“That doesn’t make any difference,” Grünspan says, “If he is a lonely man, then he is a masturbator.”

“Does your book have a title?”

I said, “Not yet.”

“None?”

"None, Not even a working title."

"Call your book: *The Masturbator*."

"*The Masturbator*?"

"*The Masturbator!*"

"A best seller's title," said Grünspan. "If I were in your place, I won't change this title. A first-class title: *The Masturbator*." (48–49)

The image of the author as self-centered subject, as masturbator, is central to Hilsenrath's image of the Jew in America. Isolated, deprived of normal human contact, languageless, speaking German in an English-speaking world, Bronsky functions on the margins of society, much like the picaro. It is language, for Bronsky, German and its (for him) necessary context, "Culture" and the novel as cultural artifact, that define Bronsky's world. Bronsky is so tied to German as his means of expressing his experiences of the world, of the Holocaust, that he is unable to see himself in a non-German context, even when this would be necessary to achieve his desired status as a writer. Being a writer means for Bronsky writing in German, and that for Hilsenrath has a very specific rationale:

I said: "You know it's not easy writing in a language which no one wants to speak with me."

"No one?"

"With the exception of a couple of immigrants, whom I happen to know."

"Oh."

"That is one of my worst problems."

"You're talking about German?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you write in English, a language which everyone understands?"

"I can't."

"Are you dependent on German?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand that."

"Me, neither."

"Aren't you a Jew?"

"But of course."

"Yuh-huh." (105–06)

For Hilsenrath the problem of the Jew's discourse is the problem of the exile's language, a problem that haunts German-Jewish writers in non-German-speaking exile after 1933 (and especially after the *Anschluss* of Austria). The hidden language of the "Jew" is German, not because there is a necessary link between Jews and the German language, but because it is the language of the character's childhood as well as his formative experience, the concentration camps.

Hilsenrath's America is parallel to the ghetto in *Night*, in which the inhabitants are reduced to a subhuman level by the forces that keep them in the camp, depriving them of all human needs, such as food. This theme, of New York as the new inferno, echoes through many of the post-Holocaust visions of America, such as Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. For Hilsenrath it is, however, closely tied to the act of writing, the means of communication. Grünspan's title for the novel, a novel which remains unwritten in the course of the novel, points toward the pollution of the Jews' discourse, but a pollution which comes from without, from the blind anti-Semitism of the world in which the narrator finds himself and which he, unlike his alterego in *Night*, who dies at the conclusion of the novel, survives. But his survival as author is placed within a fantasy of return. The closure of the novel comes with an extensive fantasy in which Jakob Bronsky imagines himself back in Germany, returning "primarily because of my language" (200). His return to his language, German, forms the context for the completion of his novel, for which he cannot find a publisher. He proceeds to feign suicide, to persuade his aged mother to get Max Brod, Kafka's executor, to read his unpublished work. Brod, in this fantasy, sees Bronsky as a "second Kafka" (203), at which point Bronsky suddenly reappears and becomes a media star. In the dream-like television interview that closes the fantasy and the novel, Bronsky states his case for the Jew as author in contemporary Germany:

Interviewer: "Mr. Bronsky. Do you have something to say to the German people?"

Bronsky: "I have nothing to say to the old people. They know already."

Interviewer: "And to the youth?"

Bronsky: "To the youth, I want to say that they should read my book."

Interviewer: "Your book on the Jewish Ghetto?"

Bronsky: "My book against violence and inhumanity."

Interviewer: "The Masturbator?"

Bronsky: "The Masturbator." (205)

Bronsky's book remains a "Jew's book" in Germany and the fantasy that a shared language would also create some understanding vanishes. Bronsky's experiences, in the ghetto and in America, are too extreme to be understood by Germans even where the bridge of language exists. But this final chapter is but a fantasy, spun out like all children's fantasies about their own death and resurrection out of a sense of powerlessness. Bronsky remains in New York, while Hilsenrath returns to Germany to turn his sensed distance into the creativity that produced a series of major novels such as *Bronsky's Confessions*, all of which deal with the German fantasy of the damaged discourse of the Jew and the Jew's creative response.

The Jewish response to the myths spun about the nature of the language of the Jews in the fictions of postwar Germany has its high point in what has been seen as an Evelyn Waugh-like novel of black humor, *The Nazi and The Barber*.²⁰ The plot is a clear answer to Günter Grass's *Dog Years*. Like Grass, Hilsenrath presents us with two children, born within minutes of each other, friends and rivals during their childhood. Itzig Finkelstein and Max Schulz, Jew and non-Jew, are presented much like the two children in Twain's *Puddin-head Wilson*, seemingly switched at birth. The Jew is blond and blue-eyed with a straight nose and good teeth; the non-Jew is small, dark, thick-lipped, pop-eyed, hook-nosed and with bad teeth (24). Max is raised within the Finkelstein household, thus escaping his mother, the town whore. There he learns Yiddish, the language of Itzig's father, Chaim, and his wife, Sarah. For Chaim German is merely "a corrupt, destroyed, highfaluting Yiddish," thus reversing the traditional German image of Yiddish as the language of Jews and thieves (23). The narrator, Max, observes that only a few families in Wieshalle spoke Yiddish. Most of the Jews spoke German, having lived in the town for generations. Thus the non-Jew attends synagogue with his friends, learns the Hebrew alphabet seemingly by osmosis and memorizes the Sabbath prayers.

This linguistic reversal is the irony that Becker points to in *Bronstein's Children*, the irony of the randomness of all human characteristics, even those such as circumcision, traditionally

ascribed to the Jew. Max Schulz becomes a Nazi, eventually a concentration camp guard and executioner at Laubwalde, and murders his childhood friend in 1942 (303). Following the collapse of the Thousand Year Reich, Schulz escapes to the West and assumes Finkelstein's identity. While he looks like a Jew, while he speaks the hidden languages of the Jews, he is missing two signs of Jewish identity. Two signs of identity at least in the mind of a non-Jew in 1945. He does not have a camp identification number nor is he circumcised. Both he accomplishes in the ruins of postwar Berlin, after which he disappears into the displaced persons' camps as the master barber Itzig Finkelstein.

The newly circumcised Itzig Finkelstein immigrates to Palestine, where he assumes the role of the activist Jew, fighting as part of the Revisionist "Stern Gang" in the War of Liberation. Schulz/Finkelstein's identity is as a German Jew, but one who has the linguistic abilities of the Eastern Jew. Indeed, the wife of his employer, "a Prussian Jewess who cannot forget Prussia," (231) to use Schulz/Finkelstein's formula, "looks cross-eyed every time he speaks Yiddish with the clients" (232). While many of the "Yekes" have great difficulty learning Hebrew (one of the salient aspects of the comic stereotype of the German Jew in Israel), Schulz/Finkelstein has none. He buys a Hebrew grammar book and learns the language with alacrity (249). He adds English, the language of the British occupying forces, for good measure ("It's really just like German" [249]). This new Hebrew- and Yiddish-speaking figure marries one of the two survivors of a massacre in the Ukraine, a woman shocked into speechlessness. This motif, so ably used by Jerzy Kosinski in *The Painted Bird*, represents the loss of communicative ability in a world in which interpersonal relationships have absolutely no meaning. Language ability, such as that of Schulz/Finkelstein, is a sign of the enemy, not of the victim. Schulz/Finkelstein's wife regains her speech, and Schulz/Finkelstein eventually dies of a stroke trying to persuade his friends that he was really the murderer Schulz, not the victim Finkelstein. At the moment of death he is beyond language (318). His punishment is to spend eternity suffering the anguish of the six million he helped murder.

Toward Answering the Question:
Who Killed the Jewish Writers of Contemporary Germany and Why?

The signs that have been assumed to have a permanent signification as a sign of the Jew in postwar German letters, circumcision and the hidden language of the Jews, come to be signs of the illusions of Germans about Jews for writers such as Hilsenrath and Becker. Hilsenrath and Becker would seem, on the surface, to form a most disparate duo. Indeed, what relates them is their projection of the specific qualities of the discourse of the Jew onto a specific image of the Jew, the Jew as survivor. In some cases this alter ego is glorified, in others it is condemned. In all cases this fictional discourse is distanced from the world of the author, from the choice that he has made to move from a language contaminated with images of his inability to a world in which he can creatively use the very language. Both Hilsenrath and Becker successfully turn the image of the damaged discourse of the Jew against itself by thematizing and satirizing this myth.

Why is it that their highly successful works, both in terms of aesthetic as well as popular success, have not been reflected in the image of the Jewish writer in contemporary Germany? Why is it that contemporary criticism does not speak of a German-Jewish literature, as it is so free to speak of the Age of the Great American Jewish Novel? My sense is that Grass could and did use images of the Jew in the fifties and sixties which we at first blush understood to be sympathetic and evocative ones, since they were positive stereotypes. It is only with detailed analysis (and perhaps, historical distance), that one can see that the very reason why such images seemed to be successful (and this is true of the portrait of the Jew by other "liberal" authors of the fifties and sixties) was that these images were, at least, in part, the inversion of the negative images that had preceded them. This is not to say that Grass uses *Stürmer* caricatures in his work. But he uses their polar anti-image, and in it he maintains at least one of the major myths about the Jews, that of the Jews' hidden and secret language.

When writers such as Hilsenrath and Becker (and one can expand this list extensively) came to portray Jews in fiction, they first had to counter the accepted image of the Jew, as in the works of Grass, an image which fitted neither their self-perception nor their understanding of the appropriate manner of dealing with their seemingly

contradictory identity as Jews, Germans, and authors. It was not merely that they separated their reality from the fictions about Jews. This would have been an all too simple thing to do. For what writer confuses his/her own personality with the fictions that personality is able to generate? No. What they found was that the philo-Semitic world of German liberal politics, the world of writers who in their own minds and in their public actions represent an idealized image of the German writer in a direct continuity to the liberalism (read: Jewishness) of the 1920s (and even earlier) was able to employ images of the Jew that were poisoned. When Jews (however defined) turned to images of the Jew, they found a sense of uncanny recognition of the forces of evil as well as the forces of good. And given the radical reversal of the image of the Jew with the rise of left-wing anti-Zionism (read: anti-Semitism) in the 1970s, their reading was not wrong.

Writers in the Anglo-American world who understood themselves to be Jews, writers such as the American-Jewish author Philip Roth, in the Zuckerman novels (1979–1985), and the British-Jewish author Clive Sinclair, in his extraordinary novel *Blood Libels* (1985), were able to thematize the idea of the hidden language of the Jews. They were able to come to terms with the assumption that as Jews they see the world differently from everyone else and that, as a result, their texts are encoded with hidden “Jewish” messages. What these writers did was to transform the accusation into the stuff of their novels. By writing they disprove the special nature of the Jews’ language as assumed in Western letters. But commentators, of both the left and the right, did not recognize the cry for universalism within such a satiric representation of particularism. Unlike the Anglo-American experience in which Roth and Sinclair are viewed as Jews, “self-hating Jews,” but at least as Jews, Hilsenrath and Becker in Germany are simply denied any status as Jews within their cultural world. For to admit that Jews can write about Jewish topics and still transcend such a subject matter and thus be “real” writers, i.e., in the terminology of liberalism, writers about “universal” topics, would violate the liberal view that particularism of any sort is bad. Being a “Jewish” writer for present-day Germans (or at least for Germans and their American intellectual clones of the seventies and eighties) is an unacceptable, even racist category. And it is such an attitude that easily leads to the view that “Zionism is Racism.” To destroy such “racism” they have destroyed the idea of the “Jewish” writer. For such critics, the category of “Jewish writer” exists only for the

pre-war period. They thus connect the Holocaust with the identifiable place of the Jew in Weimar Germany. If there are no Jews in German culture today, only Germans, then the Holocaust, an attempt to destroy all sense of difference in destroying the Other, succeeded. The new liberal cry, which confuses the sense of the place of the Jewish writer in German culture with the label placed upon the Jewish writer as different by the Nazis, is to eliminate the category of the Jew completely. They have denied to contemporary German Jewish writers, dealing with the complexities of the themes of present-day German Jewry in a creative and valuable manner, their identity, an identity to no little degree imposed upon them by being Jewish in present-day Germany. Thus writers such as Hilsenrath and Becker return to these themes in order to prove that they really do exist as Germans, Jews, and writers. It is their cry that they exist as Jewish writers in Germany where they articulate the presence of the most invisible of categories, the cultural Jew.

NOTES

1. Bernt Engelmann, *Deutschland ohne Juden* (Munich: Schneekluth, 1970); citations are from the translation by D. J. Beer, *Germany without Jews* (New York: Bantam, 1984).
2. Jack Zipes, "The Vicissitudes of Being Jewish in West Germany," in his and Anson Rabinbach's, eds., *Germans and Jews since the Holocaust* (New York/London: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 27-49.
3. Peter Sichrovsky, ed., *Wir wissen nicht was morgen wird, wir wissen wohl was gestern war: Junge Juden in Deutschland und Österreich* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1985); translated by Jean Steinberg as *Strangers in Their Own Land: Young Jews in Germany and Austria Today* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).
4. *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
5. Ruth K. Angress, "A 'Jewish Problem' in German Postwar Fiction," *Modern Judaism* 5 (1985): 215-33. Prior to Angress the studies of this topic have been hopelessly utopian in their perspective, see Christiane Schmelzkopf, *Zur Gestaltung jüdischer Figuren in der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1945* (Hildesheim:

Georg Olms, 1983) and Heidy M. Müller, *Die Judendarstellung in deutschsprachiger Erzählprosa (1945–1981)* (Königstein: Athenäum, 1984).

6. Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon, 1962), 99. The original German, which is even more radical in its use of *mauscheln*, is to be found in Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1963), 85.

7. All references are to the reprint in his collected works: Alfred Döblin, *Reise in Polen* (Olten: Walter, 1968). On Döblin and the discourse of the Jews see Hans Peter Althaus, "Ansichten vom Jiddischen. Urteile und Vorurteile deutschsprachiger Schriftsteller des 20. Jahrhunderts," in Walter Röll and Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer, eds., *Auseinandersetzungen um jiddische Sprache und Literatur/Jüdische Komponenten in der deutschen Literatur—die Assimilationskontroverse: Akten des VII. Internationalen Germanisten-Kongresses. Göttingen 1985* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986), 63–71.

8. Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 324.

9. See Lyle H. Smith, "Volk, Jew and Devil: Ironic Inversion in Günter Grass's *Dog Years*," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 3 (1978): 85–96.

10. Günter Grass, *Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland* (Niewied/Berlin: Hermann Luchterhand, 1965), 11–12.

11. See the discussion (with an unpublished remark by Grass on the source of the portrait of the Jew in *The Diary of A Snail* in the biography of Marcel Reich-Ranicki) in Hans Dieter Zimmermann, "Spielzeughändler Markus, Lehrer Zweifel und die Vogelscheuchen: Die Verfolgung der Juden im Werk von Günter Grass," in Herbert A. Strauss and Christhard Hoffmann, eds., *Juden und Judentum in der Literatur* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985), 295–306.

12. *Jakob der Lügner* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1969); *Jacob the Liar*, trans. Melvin Kornfeld (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

13. *Der Boxer* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976). See Chaim Shoham, "Jurek Becker ringt mit seinem Judentum. "Der Boxer" und Assimilation nach Auschwitz," in Walter Röll and Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer, eds., *Auseinandersetzungen um jiddische Sprache und Literatur / Jüdische Komponenten in der deutschen Literatur—die Assimilationskontroverse: Akten des VII. Internationalen Germanisten-Kongresses. Göttingen 1985* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986), 225–36.

14. Leah Ireland, "Your Hope is on My Shoulder: Bobrowski and the World of the *Ostjuden*," *Monatshefte* 72 (1980): 416–30.

15. Hans Jürgen Schultz, ed., *Mein Judentum* (Berlin: Kreuz, 1979), 10–18.

16. All references are to *Bronsteins Kinder* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).

17. *Nach der ersten Zukunft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 62–102.

18. "Max und Itzig," *Der Spiegel*, 22 August 1977, 137–39. See also Sidney